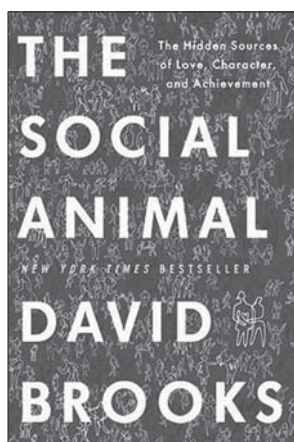


In *Catharsis*, Andrzej Szczeklik foregrounds medicine as a skill derived from magic. Art and science are woven into a seamless fabric that dissolves traditional boundaries. The book provides contemporary physicians with access to humanistic sources that are the wellspring of their profession, and provides humanists with biomedical sources to which they have unwittingly but materially contributed.

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***The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* by David Brooks**

New York: Random House, 2011.
Hardcover, 424 pages, \$27.00.

Reviewed by Fran Roberts Willard

Over the last few decades, groundbreaking research by geneticists, neuroscientists, psychologists, sociologists, behavioral economists, and others has yielded new insights into the inner workings of the human mind. *New York Times* columnist and bestselling author David Brooks has synthesized this great wealth of data in his book, *The Social Animal*, in which he offers us a new and uplifting view of human nature.

Brooks asserts it is not our rational conscious mind that determines how successful and fulfilled we are in life, but rather it is our unconscious mind, that murky realm of passions, perceptions, social cues, genetic predispositions, drives, and character traits. While our conscious mind might yearn for wealth, status, and applause, that surface definition of success, it is actually our unconscious mind that holds the most sway in determining our character and our ability to build healthy, loving relationships and to achieve our dreams. In a way, we are the outcome of what is happening within us below our own level of awareness.

The good news is our unconscious mind is quite smart. Brooks pictures the conscious mind “as a general atop a platform, who sees the world from a distance and analyzes things linearly and linguistically,” whereas the unconscious mind “is like a million little scouts.” The job of these scouts is to be immersed in the landscape and to send back a constant flow of signals and generate instant responses. It’s from these scouts that we place value on things, that we feel a wave of affection when we see an old friend or outrage when we perceive a situation as unfair. They can save us from danger when we experience fear and lead us towards greater fulfillment. These signals help us interpret our world and guide us. Not surprisingly, people lacking in emotion tend not to lead well-organized lives and often fall into self-destructive or dangerous behavior.

If our emotions are the very foundation of reason, the conscious mind still has the ability to influence them; the two are intertwined. For example, our conscious mind might decide what to order on a menu, but our unconscious mind determines what food we like. Sometimes we have to consciously teach ourselves to like a certain food. It is by being aware of and educating our emotions that we are able to gain wisdom.

Contrary to popular thought, we are not primarily self-contained individuals, but rather we emerge out of our relationships. None of us are self-made. We are deeply interpenetrated with one another. We are social animals from birth. Brook writes:

The truth is, starting even from birth, we inherit a great river of knowledge, a great flow of patterns coming from many ages and sources. The information that comes from deep in the evolutionary past, we call genetics. The information revealed thousands of years ago, we call religion. The information passed along from hundreds of years ago, we call culture. The information passed along from decades ago, we call family, and the information offered years, months, days or hours ago, we call education and advice.

Brooks provides countless sources to back up his points, and this book could have been a dry, scientific read if not for a creative device he adopted from Rousseau to share information and occasionally add a touch of humor. He has created two characters, Harold and Erica, and has told their life stories—their formative years, their falling in love and marrying, their separate careers, their challenges, up until Harold’s death. This allows Brooks to explore the themes of attachment, parenting, education, love, relationships, culture, achievement, politics, morality, aging, death, and more. This is an ambitious book, to say the least.

Harold and Erica are not vivid, fleshed-out characters, but are meant to serve as concrete examples of what the research shows. Both characters come to possess strong noncognitive skills, which are often hard to measure but help determine character. Such skills inform some of the most important decisions we make in life, such as whom to marry and whom to befriend, what our likes or dislikes will be, and how we attain the drive to excel or the ability to delay gratification. As a parent of three young children, I was most interested in learning how we can build up those noncognitive muscles in our young.

Brooks emphasizes the importance of the mother-child bond. Even as a fetus, Harold was already listening to and memorizing the tone of his mother’s voice. At birth the bonding between them needs to begin in earnest, a rather rhythmic “conversation” using touch, tears, looks, smell, and laughter. Babies are born to interpenetrate with their mothers, to learn from them and to begin to build models in their heads of how to understand reality and to relate to others. With strong attachment with his mother or primary caregiver, the child will soon feel safe enough to begin to explore the world around him. Brook writes:

The delightful thing about Harold at this stage was that he was both a psychology major and physics major. His two main vocations were figuring out how to learn from his mother and figuring out how stuff falls. He’d look at her frequently to

make sure she was protecting him, and then go off in search of things to topple.

Securely attached children have parents that are attuned to them and mirror their moods. They have a huge head start in life, as studies show they later tend to handle stress well and have an easier time making new friends. They know how to build good relationships with teachers, which leads to greater academic success. And, this ability to form deep relationships paves the way for greater happiness in life.

Avoidantly attached children have parents who are emotionally withdrawn or unavailable, and they are unable to establish an emotional rapport. These children sent signals out but nothing came back. They later have trouble developing close friends and suffer more stress and are unsure in social situations. Studies have borne out that early attachment patterns are a reliable indicator of competence at subsequent stages and of the quality of other relationships later in life, particularly romantic relationships. For example, men with unhappy childhoods are three times more likely to be solitary at age 70.

Harold is from a middle-class family. A popular, athletic boy, he is able to perceive social cues well but still lacks some depth. Then he is inspired by a teacher, who introduces him to Greek history in such a way that instills in him how best to learn and how to think, which involves the interplay between conscious learning and unconscious processing. The teacher gives Harold assignments involving a four-step process of learning: 1) knowledge acquisition, to download the information so that the brain can begin to work on it; 2) repetition, to review the material over and over until it becomes automatic; 3) gestation, to play with it (journal entries, games) and to endure the uncertainty until an answer becomes clear; and 4) the “Eureka” moment, to make an argument and bring it to a point, moving from the “slow hunch” to the solution. Through this intense process, Harold is able to move from being a passive learner to being an active thinker, who can see patterns, study different vantage points, and draw new conclusions. He will be a lifelong learner, ultimately a scholar.

Harold passes his 20s, his “Odyssey years,” and is starting to yearn for more connection in his life, when he meets Erica. There are snap judgments. Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov, of Princeton, have found that we make judgments about a person’s trustworthiness, competence, aggressiveness, and likeability within the first tenth of a second. These sorts of “first glimpses” are remarkably reliable months later in predicting how people will feel about each other.

Both Harold’s conscious and unconscious minds kick into gear in assessing whether or not Erica would make a good life partner for him. He likes her waist-to-hip ratio and clear skin, both signs of health and fertility. Erica subconsciously is looking for signs of trustworthiness as her own primeval process demands. It will motivate her to choose a man not only for insemination but for continued support. It will entice her to marry a man slightly older, taller, and stronger than herself.

Falling in love is both rational and irrational and involves imagining your partner as somehow enchanted. Brooks states

that such love is not so much an emotion as a motivational state: “A person in love is in a state of need,” a need for the other person. The unconscious mind wants limerence, a state of harmony in which we forget ourselves, lose the “skull barrier,” and merge with something or someone. This desire for limerence drives us to seek perfection in our crafts, to fuse with nature and with God. And, we seek it with another. Harold and Erica choose to marry.

Erica had a vastly dissimilar upbringing from Harold, and she had beaten the odds. Born to out-of-wedlock parents, she’d grown up in poverty and chaos. Her mother was Chinese and suffered from depression. Her father was Mexican. But Erica is tough and determined and had made one vital decision: she changed her environment. Brooks stresses the importance of the conscious mind to make such a change when one is stuck in a troubling situation. Change the environment and then let the new cues work for you. By getting herself enrolled in a charter school with new rules, codes, and expectations, Erica was able to extract herself from her environment and propel herself upward, eventually becoming a high official in a Democratic presidential administration after an illustrious business career.

By adulthood, she had developed self-control and self-discipline through her habits that would enable her to be a high achiever. It was not a question of willpower but of understanding the power of continuing to take small and repetitive action until that action is part of the unconsciousness. Fake it till you make it, so to speak.

Erica had also learned to perceive the world in productive and far-seeing ways. She had developed “street smarts.” She did not just passively take in the world around her, but more crucially, was able to see patterns in her environment. She was attuned to others so she could learn from them what they had to offer. She was open-minded, willing to question her own beliefs and to study the evidence. She also had a clear vision for her future. Her identity was deeply ingrained in her psyche.

The research studies cited in *The Social Animal* are vast if not particularly full of depth, and there are plenty of interesting facts in the book, such as that a baby’s brain creates 1.8 million new neural connections per second. Or, that a disproportionately high percentage of successful people have a parent die or abandon them in early life, giving them, Brooks concludes, a sense of vulnerability, the awareness that everything could rapidly be taken away, and leaving them with a hunger to establish themselves early.

The story told here is chronological, but it is always now, this same decade in the early 21st century, even though the lives of Harold and Erica span decades. This is not a book to be read as a novel, for the characters never come to life. They’re simply stick figures. It’s the little morsels of scientific fact that are interesting. I wouldn’t advise reading the book through chronologically, as it just didn’t hold my interest from start to finish. That said, you could open the book to any page and read for a while, close it again, and walk away satisfied, until the next time.

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